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DIS - FIGURATION

Álvaro Velasco Pérez

Sexy is out-of-fashion. This becomes rather natural as its allure got lost following the breaking of its taboos circa late-'60s. Paradoxically, the attraction of sexy's seclusion got de-mythified by its own liberation. Nowadays, sexy still speaks to us, however it doesn't question us anymore. Now it only reveals itself as yet another ground for social, economic and epistemological power struggles following analysis à la Foucault. However, even more drastically, sexiness has fallen trapped under suspicion of dishonesty. In a post-modern time in which we search for authentic inter-personal relationships, sexiness emerges as a mask that hides unfulfilled promises. It is the seduction that Baudrillard analysed in *De la séduction*(1979), in a search of a deeper understanding of the "sacred horizon of appearances." His argument is not a pursuit of hidden meanings, but in remaining at the level of the manifest signs. However, Baudrillard's attraction for 'seduction' rather than 'interpretation', points to the fact that in the 'sexy' there is a delay between the sign and the signified. It is the—unfortunately many times experienced, in my case—personal acquaintance with the delusion of sexiness. The sexy offers an image that conceals something that is never revealed because is never present. This movement ranges from the basic idea of make-up to the high grounds of marketable products in consumerist societies. The architecture of the sexy never draws beyond facade.

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However, if the 'fatal strategies' of the femme fatale seem rather exhausted, could we think of its reversal as a way of overcoming it? What I would like to discuss here is the possibility 'dis-figuration' as a mechanism that could overturn the strategies of contemporary sexiness. If the sexy conceals a void - being the attraction towards the mask, rather than towards what the mask covers-, could we understand dis-figuration as a paradoxical mechanism in which repulsion is the way of revealing what lies beneath?

If we consider Francis Bacon's *Study of the Human Head*(1953) (fig.1), the figure at the centre of the composition relates frontally



Figure 1

to the spectator. His face appears as a gruesome skull concealed behind a veil. The sinister mouth marked by an overemphasised smile and the eyes oversized by the lens of the spectacles dramatise the face in a state of half-life half-dead character. There is nothing seductive in Bacon's composition, save by the mysterious halo produced by the vertical folds of the veil. However, that attraction is dispelled when behind the veil we intuit the repulsive features of the skull. It is the veil that crosses the whole composition and mediates between seduction and repulsion. Indeed the question of how painting operates in relation to a veil has been present through out its history. In the well-known story of the competition in which Parrhasius deceived Zeuxis,¹ the centre of the query is the veil; it is the object of his painting—Zeuxis admitted his defeat when he intended to unveil Parrhasius' work, when in fact the veil was the actual painting—but also the mechanism of deception. As Pliny the Elder chronicles the anecdotal contest, painting is the art of deceiving by reproduction of reality as it 'really appears'. Painting moves in the tension between concealment and revelation, between what is seen and what is shown—which not necessarily come together.

1 Pliny the Elder narrates this story in his *The Natural History* (77-79 AD). In chapter 34, Pliny narrates the story of Zeuxis, an acclaimed and scrupulously careful craftsman of his art. On entering a competition, Zeuxis represented some grapes, "painted so naturally that the birds flew towards the spot where the picture was exhibited." Delighted by his trick to the animals, Zeuxis demanded that his competitor, Parrhasius, unveil his work. However, on attempting to reveal the work, Zeuxis discovered that the curtain itself, truthfully replicated, was the painting of his contender. Becoming aware of the trick, Zeuxis acknowledge his defeat as his grapes had deceived nature but Parrhasius had tricked the artist.

This tense moment can be exemplified by El Greco's *Veil of Saint Veronica* (1586-95) (fig. 2). El Greco painted several versions of this theme drawn from an iconological medieval tradition. The story follows that on his passion, a pious woman - Veronica by name - wiped the sweat and blood of Christ's face. The suffering face of Jesus was impregnated in the veil, remaining as a permanent mark of his features. Taken as a portrait of Christ's disfiguration, the veil recalls the scene in the Gospel in which Christ is trans-figured in front of his disciples.² In these two mirroring moments of the life of the Man-God, the latter represent a theophany - or visible manifestation of God—, while in the previous his divinity is concealed. However, it is through the tradition of his agony that El Greco represented the portrait of Christ. The veil of the Veronica is not a scene gathered in any of the four gospels. The actual name of the woman in the medieval tradition derives from 'vera icona' or true image. In El Greco's depiction, the veil of the painter is the one that wipes the secluded image of Christ in the Passion. What is shown is not the suffering features of the agony - what is represented in the tradition of the Veronica—, but the painting presents a serene gaze of the Man-God looking back the beholder. We could define El Greco's mechanism of vera-icona as the act of painting that moves the question of the figure beyond the veil, to a zone of indiscernibility - not in the sense in which Deleuze approaches Francis Bacon's operations that generate a common space/overlap between man and animal³, but—between human and divine.

Nevertheless, it is Deleuze himself who draws the relationship between El Greco's idea of religious figure - or what we are calling here the disfiguration of the vera icona - and Bacon's disfiguration. Deleuze remarks the liberation of celestial figures in El Greco, in which "Figures are lifted up and elongated, refined without measure, outside all constrain"⁴ that figuration imposed in previous traditions of painting. Looking back at Bacon's *Study of the Human Head*, his mechanism of disfiguration is different to El Greco's flaming Figures or the veil that wipes the agony clearing the divine face in the vera icona. Bacon's faces are disfigured by torn, spasms, stretching and contractions which are actions that rather than coming from outside are initiated within the Figure⁵.

2 Mt 17, 1-8 (KJV)

3 Deleuze, Gilles. *Francis Bacon: the Logic of Sensation*. 2003. Bloomsbury Academic. London. p.16.

4 Ibid. p. 7.

5 Ibid. p. 11-14



Figure 2

This strategy dismembers the body of the Figure from its material structure. A mechanism that finally culminates by breaking the preponderance of the face in figuration: “the Figure, being a body, is not the face, and it does not even have a face. It does have a head, because the head is an integral part of the body.(...) As a portraitist, Bacon is a painter of heads, not faces, and there is

a great difference between the two. For the face is a structured, spatial organisation that conceals the head.”⁶ Bacon’s mechanism of disfiguration is a rupture of the concealment perpetrated by the face. His *Study of the Human Head* develops an operation of erasure of the facial features through the scrubbing, or rubbing of it, through its scratching or white (pink-grey-and-blue) washing. However, his relation to veiling is different to the wiping of El Greco. Bacon describes his take on the veil as:

“Great art is always a way of concentrating, reinventing what is called fact, what we know of our existence—a reconcentration... tearing away veils that fact acquires through time. Ideas always acquire appearance veils, the attitudes people acquire of their time and earlier time. Really good artists tear down those veils.”⁷

His mechanism of disfiguration is an action of tearing down, an act of unveiling. Rather than producing a true image - vera icona—, painting operates as dis-covering, in a rather Heideggerian notion of truth as aletheia - unconcealment⁸. The portrayed head manifests itself as head, disfiguring its facial features. However, that movement of unveiling is paradoxically produced by the visual erasure produced by the veil.

A third mechanism of dis-figurative painting was developed by Jean-Michel Basquiat in his short - but extremely productive - oeuvre. Neither wiping nor erasing, his mechanism could be called defaci/ement©. Profoundly shocked by the police killing of his

6 Ibid. p. 15.

7 Francis Bacon interview with Hugh Davies. June 26, 1973: cited in Davies and Yard, p. 1

8 Rodney R. Coltman, *The Language of Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Heidegger in Dialogue*. 1998 SUNY Press, p. 38.



Figure 3



Figure 4

friend graffiti artist Michael Stewart, Basquiat reproduced the brutality of the event in his painting of 1983 (fig.4). The image depicts two cartoon-like policemen surrounding an anonymous figure in the centre. The inscription defaci/ement© crowns the scene establishing the doubling dynamic of the painting. Defacement or defacemento [Italian] is both the clobbering of the officers but also the operation of the artist. The central black figure is the victim of both trajectories, becoming a contemporary form of martyrdom whose gleaming crown of thorns “refers at the same time to the apotheotic Christ(...) and to the African American heroes” he depicted. Keith Haring remembers how Basquiat was projecting himself in Stewart’s incident, “it was like it could have been him. It showed how vulnerable he was.” Similar mechanism was used by Basquiat in his iconic Self Portrait of the same year. However, the cancelling out of the facial features into blackness follows a different mechanism to that of El Greco or Bacon. If we look at Basquiat’s Made in Japan 1 (1982)(fig.3), the de-framed surface constitutes the veil into which the portrait is inscribed. The defacement is carried by a series of overlapping of lines of contour in pale blue, intense red and black. The face is framed and reframed, deformed by an “aggressive attack on physical intactness.” Fig.5 shows Basquiat posing next to an unfinished version of the painting to which a further series of disfiguration were carried out in the canvas. However, rather than Bacon’s process of erasure, Basquiat moves through reaffirmation and accumulation that attack the face, drawing it into a state of living dead. The agony that El Greco wiped out into vera icona is here restated in a movement to go deeper into the suffering figure whose vanishing point is the triumph over torment. The defacement into black figure, as opposed to the wiping and erasing, is produced by accumulation. Basquiat mechanism of



Figure 5

disfiguration operates through re-vei/aling in order for the concealed to emerge.

The three mechanisms of disfiguration—vera icona (wiping), un-veiling(erasure) and re-vei/aling(accumulation) move between the conceptual operation and its material outcome. However, the mechanisms of disfiguration are far from a flee from the visual

presence of the body into abstraction. Both Basquiat and Bacon were extremely obsessed with anatomy. Oliver Berggruen recalls Basquiat's traumatic experience when, as a child, the graffiti artist was run over by a car. In his time in the hospital, he was given a volume of Gray's Anatomy that he obsessively copied. Berggruen argues that the episode was present in many of Basquiat's composition, culminating in his Anatomy(in 18 parts) (1982). Similarly, Bacon is known by his studies of human body, in compositions that reject any narrative, focusing on the anatomy of the Figure itself. However, both understand anatomy as a movement beneath the surface: into broken bones, torn members, open mouths, fractured skeletons...that constantly try to examine the inner condition of the Figure. Dis-figuration, being it through the mechanisms of vera icona, unveiling, or re-vei/aling, is an operation whose aim is to make what is concealed to emerge. It poses a direct challenge to the exhausted strategies of seduction of sexiness. Disfiguration counters the visual spell of sexiness in visual arts, opening the possibility of understanding painting as operations in the veil. To the condition of 'concealment of something that is not present' of the sexy, disfiguration obsessively intends 'to resur(face) what is concealed'.